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## PLAY AND SOCIAL PROGRESS<sup>1</sup>

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No person can work in an associated charities long without witnessing tragedy. No artist can paint pictures quite like those indelibly impressed upon the memory of a social worker:

A self-supporting father and mother, both under thirty-five, out of work, yet afterwards proving their willingness to labor; three little children; two rooms up one flight; family without food for three days because they were too proud to beg.

Four children under thirteen found in zero weather going to school without overcoats, mittens, or even underclothing; blue with cold, yet cheerily replying, "We are used to it."

A refined family of five, the man a clergyman's son, dejectedly reading a notice of eviction from their home, and not knowing where they were to spend the night.

A woman suffering great physical pain for three years for want of an operation because she kept putting off visiting the doctor until there should be money to pay. "The children needed so many things," she said. Because the industrial depression forced her to receive aid, she was in mental distress, but at this time was willing to be treated by a physician, and happy when once again she was free from the needless physical pain.

Hunger, cold, loss of shelter, and needless pain—surely these are tragedies. Yet the climax of tragedy is not reached until one has unveiled another picture—that of a dwarfed, starved, unresponsive, joyless life. The other pictures have dealt with externals; this one deals with the spirit itself. Here is tragedy. The body is found living after the spirit is dead. Lack of food, fuel, even the lack of a home, is no such tragedy as the lack of *life*. Death by accident is for the moment terrible, but not nearly as tragic as the gradual death of the spirit while the breath still remains in the body—to see an individual or a family going through the forms of

<sup>1</sup>An address delivered at the Maine Conference of Charities and Corrections, held at Bangor, Me., October 18, 1909.

living after the hours have ceased to bring pleasure! When the play spirit has been lost and the future is only one long-drawn-out work, work, work, which taxes the body but does not engage the soul, then tragedy has reached its climax.

*Who is Responsible?*—"For twenty years I have worked at the same task in the shop," said a spiritless man in Portland, Maine, as he reported his ineffectual efforts to procure work. In the morning he had gone to his labor and bent his back to the day's toil. At night he had returned tired to his home. He retired early, and the next morning awakened to repeat the monotony of the day previous. For him there had been no dissipation, no religious ecstasy, only working, eating, sleeping—working, eating, sleeping. By making himself a piece of machinery he had made it impossible for him to preserve the elasticity which accompanies *life*. As a piece of machinery he began to show signs of wear. He was replaced. He had hardened in the mold into which he had allowed himself to be placed. He could not then change himself, except by a miracle, and this he was not able to perform. "What has been your recreation?" he was asked. "My \$10 a week was needed for my family," was the reply. Who sinned—this man or society, or both—that his spirit became blind, that his play spirit died, that he was not kept fresh, strong, resourceful by recreation of the right sort? Recreation need not be a matter entirely, or largely, of dollars and cents. The play spirit kept strong throughout life, however, presupposes that the child has been taught resourcefulness in play, has learned how to turn his leisure time into advantage and power.

*Living, Yet Dead.*—Youthful philanthropists of all ages have lectured on the improvidence of the poor, and have told interesting stories of clothing, given for warmth, pawned for the price of a theater ticket; of whole families going to the circus when there was no bread for supper. One who knew what was in the hearts of men and understood their need spoke wisely when He said: "Man does not live by bread alone." It is far more pathetic to find families whose only yearning is for bread than it is to find families where bread money is paid for theater tickets. When the yearning for pleasure has disappeared the spirit is dead, life has fled. While there is life, however, while excitement is more highly prized even than food, there is hope. It may be that hopelessness is better than

vice, but it is easier for the social worker to deal with the "love of pleasure gone wrong" than with deadness.

The lowest inferno is reached when the mother, who should be the inspiration of her children, by her daily routine of drudgery in caring for her thirteen children, toiling for them early and late, has so sapped her own energy that all her labor gives them nothing but a physical return, and they see her only as a machine, a thing like the rest of the furniture of the home, with a few added attributes, such as motion. No Sundays, no holidays, no days off, no rest hours—until finally she realizes she is dead, that her children and her husband have grown apart from her; unless they, too, are dead. Amid her gloom, in a moment of vision, she speaks to the social worker, who is trying to find a way of lightening her task and brightening her life: "You must not expect much of the likes of me—the life is all squeezed out." No earthquake, no railroad accident, no sudden catastrophe, involves such depths of tragedy as the slow paralysis of a human spirit, as gradually the unused parts of the spirit atrophy and die, until only the bare shell which is called the body is left. It is especially tragic when the person is conscious that the life is dying, and yet seems unable to prevent it.

It is said that a certain insect fastens itself upon the apple tree and draws its nourishment from the sap. When it has fastened itself upon the tree and has ceased to move about, part after part drops off from disuse until the insect has lost all power except that of reproduction and of drawing its food from the tree. It thus comes merely to exist. Whether or not this be a true description of the insect, it is a true picture of some men and women and represents one of the greatest tragedies known—existence which seems to have become purposeless.

*The Tragedy of Childhood.*—We know the longings of the poor boy for a good time. Men who have known in their childhood the depths of poverty and the cruelty of child labor tell us that it was comparatively easy to live on scanty food, that it was no hardship to go without an overcoat on winter days, because they were too proud to wear the old one, threadbare and with short sleeves. The hardship lay in the fact that they had to work while other boys of their age were at play. To miss the childhood games is far worse than to go hungry and cold. It is wrong for society to allow children to bear burdens beyond their years and

strength, but the bitter cruelty of child labor lies not in the burden-bearing; the great hardship is in what is missed. As the vegetation of one age is stored in the earth to furnish fuel for another age, so the child's laughter later appears in the strength of manhood. There are few things that the child laborer finds so hard to understand as why he must work while his friends are at play. Neither can we explain to such a child why we have deprived him of his play, for there is no reason we may honestly give. We know the feelings of the boy who is deprived of his inalienable right to play because of poverty. We know, however, afterwards through life he is to a certain extent one-sided. It would be interesting if we could also know the feelings of boys who, because of the wealth of their parents, have been deprived of the opportunity for normal play. Are they also conscious of a one-sidedness in after life?

*The Lack of the Play Spirit is Not a Problem Confined to a Single Class.*—At the present time many self-supporting laboring men have never enjoyed a vacation of more than two or three days. Some men are not only ready, but glad, to work twelve hours a day, seven days in the week, fifty-two weeks in the year, year after year. Should holidays be given them, they would know no other way of spending them than in dissipation. They do not even recognize their own need for time to play. Treadmill, mechanical existence is not confined to the "submerged tenth" or the "other half" of our population. There are industrial leaders who boast they have never taken a vacation and who make existence one round of work, who have also lost the play spirit. The man highest up may be making as much of a machine of himself as the day laborer. Each may be going round and round the treadmill in the cage each has built for himself, or has allowed others to build for him. Even the social worker may lose the spirit of play. Such a loss may not lessen the volume of work done, but it materially reduces its value. The present financial and industrial losses due to under-play and consequent loss of power on the part of business leaders, for one year alone, would reach a startling amount.

Few lives, even among the dependent, are as dead as the picture of tragedy which has been drawn; the condition described is admittedly exceptional. Yet the lack of vividness, responsiveness and joy portrayed is in varying degrees to be observed in all walks of life, in our cities and in the open country. Few people are obtaining the

maximum amount of joy, efficiency and power from their lives. The presence of the play spirit means adaptability, capacity for quickly appreciating the influences about them, keen enjoyment of the game, whatever it be, which is being played, and a consciousness that there are other players besides themselves.

*Complete Life.*—The intensive development of life already here is better than a numerical increase in lives lived on a lower plane. Such an increase in numbers might mean in part adding misery to misery. The farmer who grows a larger crop on the acres he already possesses is wiser than the man who buys many acres and obtains but a quarter of the possible yield. The contractor who builds the five-story building does better than the one who builds the first story of five buildings and leaves each incomplete. Philosophers have now agreed that play is as much a part of life as work—that each day, if complete in itself, is made up of work, play and rest; that life without play is incomplete; that play is not a preparation for more work, but is itself life. In any community where one group works all the time and another group not at all, both groups are leading incomplete lives. It is not meant that some should work and others should play, but that all should both work and play. When it is recognized that life without play is partial, it at once becomes clear that work hours must be so arranged that all shall have time to play. The laborer who is content to work twelve hours each day, the industrial leader who prides himself on not having taken a day off for ten years, have both been educated for work, not for life.

Our educators are now seeing clearly that the teacher who does not know what it is possible to learn about play as well as about work is only half qualified to train her children for life. Gradually a large number of normal schools and colleges have introduced courses in play; and a committee of educators has prepared a normal course in play.

The lack of resourcefulness for the use of leisure time is responsible for much immorality. Probation workers assure us that the playground has a large service to perform in training the next generation of young people to realize the real pleasure which may be obtained from one hour's leisure. The play habit must be formed, the play spirit developed, before the character becomes set. Thus, the playground is of value not only in affording the child

a place to live as a child, but also in preparing the child to continue to live throughout manhood.

Society has recognized that more outdoor life must be given our children if our men and women are to be physically strong. This outdoor opportunity must be given through joyous, spontaneous play. If the child's energy be not given an outlet in play in the right direction, we have learned that we must multiply probation officers and juvenile courts; but when playgrounds are established, experience has demonstrated that there is a decrease in the amount of juvenile crime. Those fallen below the poverty line, if they are to rise above it, must have sufficiently powerful incentiveness in the effort to draw them up. Joy and pleasure have greater power than fear and pain. Recreation gives balance, poise, physical faith, adaptability, the capacity for entering upon new tasks, and thus is a powerful factor in social progress in this field. Social workers are recognizing that they cannot fully solve the problem of poverty in any district except as they give attention to the problem of recreation.

*Play and Industry.*—Industry also realizes that it must face the recreation problem. The social spirit of the nation is crying out for better pay for the least well-paid workers. The leaders of industry are asking, "How can wages be increased under present industrial competition?" Many workers at present are not worth the meager wages they receive. They must be made efficient. One thing is certain—that if by providing wholesome recreation for our people, greater incentive to live can be given, men will seek to be more efficient and to share more largely in this more wholesome and happier life. Such men will render more efficient service, increase the industrial output and enable their employers to pay increased wages. Men and women must be trained to be efficient enough to earn in fewer hours all that is needed, that the working day may be shorter, the play hours longer and the pay adequate for a normal standard of living. An efficient worker for seven hours is better than a listless employee for ten. Whatever vitalizes and quickens life increases the earning capacity and brings industrial prosperity to all. Society as a whole is only beginning to appreciate the increase in industrial efficiency which will come when the industrial value of play is recognized. Joyous life will give

power; and men conscious of this power will earn and receive a living wage.

*The Play Movement.*—The part which play is to have in social progress is being recognized as never before, although the playground movement is yet in its infancy. The number of cities maintaining playgrounds has grown from 90 in 1907 to 177 in 1908, and 336 in 1909. One hundred and fifty-four cities are now conducting campaigns to secure playgrounds. Two hundred and sixty-seven cities alone maintain 1,535 playgrounds, 55 cities have playground associations, and in 15 the mayors have appointed special playground commissions. About 49 per cent. of the cities maintaining playgrounds provide the money wholly or in part by public taxation. About one-half of the cities maintaining playgrounds have not reported the amount expended during the year. The amount spent by those which reported was \$1,353,114. Chicago expended \$500,000; New York, \$123,000. East Orange, with a population of only 31,506, provided \$7,500 for the play of her children.

In a number of inaugural addresses recently delivered by mayors the play problem received as much attention as the public schools. The National Women's Trade Union League, at its last convention, passed resolutions urging local chapters to work for playgrounds. The National Federation of Labor has appointed official delegates to attend the next playground congress. The International Congress of Tuberculosis, which met in Washington in 1908, passed resolutions favoring the establishment of playgrounds as an important agency in the prevention of tuberculosis. Women's clubs, associated charities, Young Men's Christian Associations, civic clubs, chambers of commerce, even taxpayers' protective associations, are active in promoting playgrounds. Public-spirited men and women in Cincinnati, Ohio; Springfield, Mass.; Sag Harbor, N. Y., and many other cities have donated playgrounds to their native places. The people in Pittsburgh, by a referendum vote, have recently authorized a \$700,000 bond issue to provide play facilities. Several cities have this year doubled the number of hours their playgrounds are open, thus obtaining twice the value from their plants. Some outdoor grounds have been equipped with electric lights, so that the young people who work may play after the day's toil is over. Play centers in a number of cities are kept open throughout the year, winters as well as summers.

Seventy-seven per cent of the cities maintaining playgrounds report that the number of their play leaders is 3,756. Cities now feel that the one essential for a playground is a play leader. Actual experiences in cities like Pawtucket, Toledo and Duluth have clearly demonstrated this fact. Without such a leader, a playground having most costly equipment may be a positive menace to the neighborhood. With the right leader, the smallest space may be made a children's paradise.

From the consideration of play for children the cities have passed to public recreation for families. The school buildings are no longer to remain idle the greater part of the time, but are more and more to be used as the social centers for entire families. The city playground has been adapted to meet the needs of the rural school. Country districts are now attempting to secure social centers, and are utilizing the school or the church, or both. The great need at the present time is that each community working out its problem shall do so in the light of all experiments which other cities have tried, with the benefit of the advice of those who have had opportunity to study the problem. In order that there might be a clearing house for play information and that social progress through the development of play might be as rapid as possible, citizens from all parts of the United States have united in forming the Playground Association of America.

Our cities have recognized that social progress presupposes an education of the people that shall quicken and vitalize their life. Though the average length of life is being increased, it avails little unless the average life is being deepened and enriched. A year is often lived in an hour; and a thousand years of social progress may be made in a single decade. It is being recognized that the hours of vivid life can be most easily increased by arranging that the leisure hours, when restraint is removed and self-expression is easy, shall give joyful contact with other persons under normal, wholesome influences. In so far as the spirit of play reigns, imagination keeps the life healthy, and each unconsciously puts himself in the other man's place, the "man with the hoe" and the man "highest up" try to understand each other's difficulties, and no task of social adjustment is then too great. Whatever is done in any country to foster the play spirit shortens the time which must elapse before poverty and dependency shall be practically ended, and raises all

life to a higher plane. The Golden Age in Grecian history was possible because there was leisure for play. The modern Golden Age is being ushered in when there shall also be opportunity for play; this time in a democracy where there shall be no slaves, but where all shall have an equal right to play. Except as a people gain and retain the play spirit which is natural to little children, they do not enter into the possibilities of social progress.